

Hair

Why write a story that starts with a comb? A comb is a comb. An ordinary, everyday object, I'm sure you'll agree. Everybody in the world must own a comb. Or at least everybody in the world who has hair.

Nina had hair. And lots of it. It grew thick and fast like a wild bush growing from the top of her head. If there was anybody in terrible need of a comb, it was Nina. She owned one, as a matter of fact, and it may have been one of the prettiest combs in the world.

It had a handle made of dark stained mahogany, with an inlay of mother-of-pearl rosettes. Its teeth were carved from one solid fragment of an animal's horn, rounded and sanded to high polish, and it was said to be particularly good for gently combing out tangles, massaging the scalp, and leaving hair smooth and glossy.

It had been a gift from her grandmother the last time she visited. Nina's hair had begun to grow past her ears and her Lola Asón had sat squinting at her from her chair with that day. "I had hair just like yours when I was your age," she said, and began to rummage deep in her battered old handbag. A moment later, and with a sniff of satisfaction, she drew out the fancy old comb and handed it to her. "Here, you'll be needing this," she said, nodding so vigorously that it disarranged the pins in her short gray hair. Lola Asón was stubborn and eighty-four, and so Nina didn't argue. "Use it every day, you hear? Or they might come and pick you up," said Lola Asón. She may have been a tiny bit senile too.

Well, Nina's hair went on growing well past her chin — but she never combed it. What tiresome work it was, with all the pulling and the tugging and untangling of snarls and knots, and sometimes it hurt — a lot. And so her grandmother's comb never went anywhere near Nina's hair, and Nina's hair did pretty much whatever it liked — sticking up, flopping down, twisting around and around, frizzled here there, matted there, tangled everywhere.

One day, when Nina's hair was especially in disarray, she met a big orange cat on her way home from school. It sat sunning itself on a low garden wall, and she greeted it "Meow!" as she walked by. The cat followed her with its eyes for a moment, and then it sprang off the wall and trotted after her. As soon as the cat caught up, it slipped in between Nina's feet and began to wind itself around her legs like a pretzel. Nina tried as nicely as she could to shoo it away, but the cat followed her all the way down the street. And not only that. It picked up some friends along the way.

A yellow cat, a striped cat, a black cat, a white cat, a cat with a mustache, a cat with white socks, a cat two shades of brown, and a cat flecked black-white-and-orange. They trailed after Nina in a purrrring, mrowling, whirling mass of fur, their tails in the air like antennae. The faster Nina walked, the faster they went too, and if she turned left, right, or stepped around obstacles in her way, so did the convoy of cats.

Luckily, they did not try to follow Nina indoors when she got home at last. They hung back politely on the front step while she squeezed quickly through the door. Once inside, Nina ran to the window and saw that the cats had now arranged themselves in a circle. There was a brief exchange of meows between them, a final word from the big orange cat, and then they went their separate ways.

That night, when Nina was getting ready for bed, she heard a soft scraping coming from her bedroom window. Sitting on the sill and illuminated by the light of the moon was the big orange cat that had followed her that afternoon, its eyes glowing yellow in the dark. She stared into these orbs for no more than a second, but long enough to see the cat slowly shut its eyes. When next it opened them, they were not in Nina's bedroom anymore, but somewhere else altogether.

She was standing inside a house that looked as though a small tornado had come through the door and sucked everything into its funnel before spitting them out again to land wherever they might fall. Sprawled on top of various toppled and listing bits of furniture were the companions of the orange cat, and in the center of the room there stood a huge cauldron boiling over a stove. It was surrounded by a gaggle of cackling, black-clothed women with terrible, terrible hair.

The orange cat announced itself by leaping onto a cluttered side table, sending a pile of books and odd bits of paper crashing to the floor. "Muhahahahaaaa! Ah, there you are, Dori," cackled the tallest of the women, who was swilling the contents of the cauldron with a wooden ladle. Her hair stuck out around her head like twisted wire. "Have you brought the new recruit?" she asked, and when the cat swished its tail in Nina's direction, nine women with terrible hair swiveled around to look at her. One by one they broke into smiles of approval, and also made an alarming display of rotten teeth. "Ah, welcome to the Circle, my dear," said the tallest, "we've been expecting you."

"Who are you, and where am I?" Nina cried.

“You are in the company of witches, my dear, and our scouts have selected you to join our little coven,” she answered, and there was a great deal of nodding from her eight companions. Witches! But before Nina could say a word, the witch went on. “We do hope you like soup. It’s almost done.” She brought the ladle to her mouth and tasted the soup with a noisy slurp. “Hmmm...” she said, smacking her lips, “Margot, hand me the pepper,” and a squat, jolly-looking witch plucked a pepper mill out of the snarls in her hair. “The salt, please, Frieda,” and a witch with large ears and a longish face, extracted a salt shaker from her dark brown tangles. A pinch of pepper here, a dash of salt there, and the tallest witch — whose name was Gladys — pronounced the soup ready.

The band of witches took the cauldron off the stove and steered Nina over to a long dining table oddly positioned at the bottom of a flight of stairs. Gladys seated herself at the head of the table, Nina was installed at the opposite end, and the rest of the witches took their places by the wings. The table was already set with an assortment of soup bowls, none of which were of the same size, shape, or pattern, and a slender witch with rabbit teeth and hair like a bird’s nest went around the table with the ladle. When the last bowl got its serving of soup, the witches all reached into their hair and pulled out their spoons. The witch sitting to Nina’s right produced two, offering her the second with a nearly toothless smile.

Nina looked into her bowl of soup and saw no eyeballs or rat tails or portions of toad. As far as she could tell, it was made of chicken and vegetables, and its delicious aroma made her stomach rumble.

“Eat up, my dear. We like our young witches to be well-fed,” crowed Gladys from the far end of the table while her eight companions slurped and swallowed. Nina did not want to be

impolite, so she took her spoon and risked a taste of the soup. It was delicious. She swallowed a mouthful, and then two more. And then, remembering what a strange situation she was in, Nina put her spoon down (reluctantly) and declared, “But I am not a witch.”

“Ah, but you will be,” said Gladys. “My cat is quite sure of it, and so are the rest of our scouts. Aren’t you, my lovelies?” she asked, addressing the cats who had now arranged themselves according to size along a low chest of drawers. In response to Gladys, the cats, in the manner of a choir, sang *meow* in the affirmative. “No one starts out being a witch, child,” said Gladys, waving her finger in front of her nose. There was a wart on it the size of a marble. “You turn yourself into one.”

All the witches at the table threw their heads back and burst out cackling. Some threw their hands up in the air, and others clutched at their bellies, chortling till they turned crimson in the face. “Tell us, do you brush your teeth?” asked a witch who appeared to have only two, and Nina nodded ‘yes.’ At this the witch frowned, but there were things the other witches wanted to know. “Tell us, do you wash your face?” asked one with a wart on her cheek the size of two marbles.

“Tell us, do you take a bath?” asked one whose left hand was occupied with scratching.

“Tell us, do you cut your nails?” asked another witch who speared a piece of chicken with the claw of her index finger.

Every time Nina said ‘yes,’ the smiles on their faces faded more and more. But when the witch called Frieda asked, “Tell us, do you comb your hair?” and Nina shook her head ‘no’, the witches all whooped for joy.

“Lovely, lovely! It often starts with the hair, you know,” cried the witch called Margot. “A witch can’t even stand the sight of a comb.” She reached into her hair and pulled out a tiny pink plastic comb that might have once belonged to a doll, and this made all the other witches start shrieking.

“Margot, didn’t I tell you to throw that thing away?” cried Gladys. Margot shrugged and shoved the little comb back into her hair, thinking better of producing the matching toothbrush. When order was restored in the coven, Gladys stood up from the table and regarded Nina’s head with a discerning eye.

“As a matter of fact, it does often start with the hair. Keep it up, and the rest will follow. Well, then,” she added in a businesslike manner, “Congratulations. You may expect the delivery of your own cat within the next twenty-four hours. Stare into its eyes when the moon is in the sky, and it will take you to the Circle. Dori, if you please?”

Nina never even had time to say a word. The large orange cat promptly leaped onto the dining table, fixed its great yellow eyes on her, and blinked. The next thing Nina knew, she was lying in her bed with a blanket up to her chin, and sunlight was streaming in through the window.

Had it all just been a dream?

It wasn’t real, was it? Out in the garden later that day, Nina kept turning over the events of what surely must have been a dream she had last night, when she heard a tiny squeak. She looked down at her feet, and there, sitting barely an inch from the tip of her big toe, was a tiny ball of fuzz the color of smoke. And it was staring up at her with pale green eyes. A kitten!

“Where did you come from?” Nina picked up the little kitten, still so tiny it could only squeak, and it nuzzled right into her neck. She searched for its mother, thinking it was lost, but there was no sign of it anywhere. In the end she took the tiny creature in, and it looked happy enough to come and live with her.

Expect the delivery of your own cat within the next twenty-four hours, she remembered the tall witch saying in her dream. Only a coincidence, Nina thought. There were no such things as witches, especially ones that made chicken soup.

That evening, fresh from a bath and ready to turn in for the night, Nina looked out of her bedroom window and saw the moon shining full and bright. Her hand flew to her tangled hair, and she remembered another thing the witch had said. *No one starts out being a witch, child. You turn yourself into one.*

“Huh,” Nina muttered, thinking it all very silly. But even so, she rummaged in her dresser drawer for a gift she had been given long ago and never once used. Her grandmother’s fancy old comb. She climbed into bed with it and sat turning the comb over in her hands, admiring the pearl rosettes on the handle for the first time. *Squeak*. The smoke-colored kitten, awakened from its nap at the foot of the bed, now climbed lightly onto her stomach, and yawned.

“Hello, Mimi,” Nina cooed. She slipped the comb into the pocket of her pyjama top and tickled the kitten under its chin. It fixed the green-rimmed pupils of its eyes on hers for a moment and slowly blinked. The next thing Nina knew, she was back in the topsy-turvy house inhabited by the nine bedraggled witches of last night’s dream. Except that it hadn’t been a dream after all. The nine frightful hags were gathered around the cauldron once more,

squawking excitedly and inhaling deeply of the fumes wafting from inside it. It smelled of very strong coffee.

The witch called Gladys was first to notice her. The wart on her nose seemed even bigger than Nina remembered. “Ah, you’re here!” Gladys exclaimed. “That means the cat we sent you is in working order.” *Squeak*, went Mimi, and there she was, perched securely on top of Nina’s foot. All the witches bobbed their heads in approval, and Gladys continued. “I love what you’ve done with your hair, it looks even more awful than it did yesterday! But let’s begin with your auxiliary training, shall we? Girls, where should we should start?”

“Basic Cat Training?” suggested one witch.

“One Hundred Creative Uses for Extremely Long Fingernails?” said another.

“No, the Evil Eye — how to make a person feel sick just by looking at them.”

“I vote for How to Cackle Like a Proper Witch and Strike Fear in Small Children!”

At the mention of this, all the witches tossed their heads back and began very freely to squawk, cluck, and cackle. But in spite of their very good soup and a strange feeling that she was going to like coffee, Nina didn’t want to become the tenth witch of the Circle. It was a pity, but she was going to have to tell them no.

“Excuse me,” she said, trying to make herself heard in all the din. “Excuse me!”

The witches all fell quiet and turned to look at her. Nina cleared her throat. “Thank you all very much,” she said, “but I don’t want to be a witch.”

If there was one thing Nina learned very well that night, it was never to get on the bad side of a witch. They're perfectly harmless, if you let them do as they like, but they are not quite so good-humored when you tell them 'no.'

"What do you mean, you don't want to be a witch?" demanded Gladys, and as she said this her eyes were slowly turning red.

"I..." Nina began, not quite knowing how to reply. "Well, I..."

"Aren't you getting weary of brushing your teeth?" asked one of the witches. Nina pursed her lips nervously and shook her head.

"Sick of washing your face?" asked another.

"Taking a bath?"

"Cutting your nails?"

The truth was, Nina did not find these things all that much of a bother, and now more than ever, if leaving them undone was what turned you into a witch. And so, with all honesty, she shook her head 'no.'

This time the eyes of the eight other witches began to turn red as well, and the ends of their tangled hair started rising into the air. And then they all advanced upon Nina like a swarm of large bats. "I don't believe I find that acceptable," said Gladys, her eyes now glowing scarlet and throwing off sparks. Her voice had changed too. Instead of just one person speaking, it sounded like there were two.

What would a circle of disgruntled witches do to an unwilling recruit? Nina was afraid to find out. She began to fidget, pulling nervously at the edges of her pajama top, when she felt something shift in her pocket.

The comb! Her Lola Asón's comb, which she had been told to use or else 'they' would come to pick her up. Lola Asón had been thinking clearly after all. Nina plunged her hand into her pocket, grasped the comb tightly by its handle, and drew it out like a sword. The pearly white rosettes glittered like stars, and its polished teeth looked menacing in the light.

The witches of the Circle took a step back and screamed. And if their hair could tear themselves away from their scalps to hide, they would have.

"Eaaagggghhhh, get it away, get it away!" shrieked Gladys.

"Aaaaaiieeee!" screeched the other hags, swatting blindly at the air in panic.

Nina reached down and plucked little Mimi off her foot. *Squeak*, it said, and while she gripped the comb in one outstretched hand to hold the witches at bay, Nina looked into the kitten's eyes and begged, "Let's go home."

As you've probably been told, when you find a lost cat and feed it, you make it yours. As far as Mimi was concerned, witch or not a witch, it belonged to Nina. And so it locked its green eyes on the little girl's and let its lids fall.

When it opened them next, Nina was back on her bed with Mimi on her stomach, yawning. "Hello, Mimi," said Nina. She put her hand in her pocket and felt her grandmother's comb there, solid and reassuring. Mimi curled herself into a ball and closed her eyes to sleep. Drawing the comb out of her pocket, Nina turned it over in her fingers, admiring the pearl rosettes on the handle. "Yes, Lola," Nina sighed, and began to comb her hair. ***